

I know that many of you have put up your Christmas tree (or 3) already. For some of you, the lights are hanging from the eaves and your house is ready to go for the holidays. Each day I see more and more houses in my neighborhood getting into the Christmas spirit. Some have giant polar bears or penguins. Others have animatronic reindeer. There are lots of Santa Claus's too. Occasionally you see manger scenes, backlit with icicle lights—little baby Jesus asleep in the weatherproof plastic hay.

But I have yet to see, and I doubt I ever will, a John the Baptizer Christmas decoration. What would that look like? A wild man with a camel pelt on his back, cinched together with a leather strap. His beard would be a mess, because there is no way to eat wild honey and locusts neatly.

In other words, he might scare the children.

In paintings, none of which I have the rights to publish on my blog, John the Baptist is portrayed in some standard ways.

In a painting by Matthias Grunewald, John is at the crucifixion of Jesus, even though John had already been beheaded by the time of Jesus' death. This painting was a favorite of the theologian Karl Barth. He had it hanging in his study. What Barth is said to have liked about it is that John the Baptist is pointing at Jesus. It is a common way for him to be portrayed—long bony finger pointing to Christ. John is also often portrayed with a lamb, because in John's Gospel, he proclaimed Jesus as the "Lamb of God, come to take away the sins of the world."

In other images, John is portrayed with his own head alongside him. Herod had beheaded John, and so the theme of martyrdom, of his dying because of his willingness to speak unpopular truth to power, is portrayed here, with his severed head.

And John is often portrayed with angel wings. Because the Greek word for "messenger" is the word from which we get the word "angel".

In any case, none of the images I found would make attractive lawn ornaments.

And yet, even as we ignore John the Baptist as we decorate our homes at the holidays, we can't deny the role he plays in this story.

The author of Mark, apparently uninterested in our penchant for decorating our lawns with angels and wise men, does not begin Jesus' story with any sort of birth narrative. We can't tell if he doesn't know the birth stories or if he doesn't care about them, but Mark begins with John the Baptizer, preparing the way by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Interestingly, according to the non-Christian historical record of the day, John the Baptizer was a better known figure than Jesus. There were plenty of people at the time who thought Jesus would become a historical footnote and John would be the one we'd be talking about years down the road. Because John had followers. Lots of them in his lifetime. All of the people of Jerusalem were leaving the city and heading to the river bank to be baptized by him. By all accounts, he was charismatic. He was troublesome. He was martyred.

And while each of the gospel writers tell the story of Jesus in their own way, ALL of them connect Jesus with John the Baptist.

Mark cites the Isaiah passage we heard read earlier this morning as we lit the advent candles—prepare ye the way of the Lord. He also throws in a little bit of the prophet Malachi, from 3:1, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” And if equating John the Baptist with the fulfillment of two prophets wasn’t enough, Mark calls attention to the fact that John dressed just like Elijah.

John the Baptist is not just a charismatic speaker who drew unimaginable crowds out into the wilderness to be baptized, but is also the fulfillment of Isaiah and Malachi’s prophecy and a doppelganger, or twin, for Elijah.

But Mark and the other gospel writers also want to make sure that we know how Jesus and John relate to each other. John tells the crowds—“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” John may have drawn the big crowds, but was just the preparer.

Preparer. Isn’t it interesting that God needs a preparer? John claimed to be there, preparing the way for Jesus. And in Isaiah, the people are told to prepare the way of the Lord. But how often do we consider that God requires someone to prepare the way?

And what is involved in preparing?

If I’m preparing for a dinner party, for example, the task is pretty simple. I buy the groceries, make the dishes, clean the house—crossing things off of a list that I have made. Preparing for an event you have scheduled is easy—you are in control, you make the list, you schedule the event so you know when it will all take place.

Preparing the way when you aren’t in charge is much trickier.

What if I’m preparing for a dinner party that could happen anytime in February? And what if the party could be anywhere from 2 people to 20 people? How do you prepare for that?

Preparing for others is often difficult because you often don’t know how it will turn out. Rosa Parks sat down on a bus because she was tired of being treated as less than human. She intentionally stayed in her seat on that bus to prepare the way. And her act of defiance that was a key moment in the Civil Rights Movement.

But she didn’t know that then. She ended up losing her job as a seamstress because of the publicity around her arrest. Were there times when she wondered if preparing the way was worth the risk? While equal rights for all Americans is a dream not yet realized, I wonder what Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. and all of the other men and women who marched and protested and prayed for equality would have thought last month on election night, when Barack Obama was elected to the Presidency. Could they see that outcome as they prepared the way?

We just finished our Stewardship Campaign—it’s never too late to pledge, by the way—and Stewardship is another illustration of preparing a way when you don’t know the outcome. When you turned in your pledge card, and when you pay your pledge each month, you trust that God will combine your gifts with the gifts of others so that we can go about the work of the church. But you don’t get to specify that you want your money to go to Mission for example, leaving someone else to pay the utility bill. In pledging, you agree to give up some control and hand it over to God, trusting that the Session will be led by the Holy Spirit to

make the best decisions about budgeting. Stewardship is preparing the Way for God's work to be done here in Boise.

And there are times you prepare the way and you don't even know you're doing it. I think about the women who came before me in ministry—they certainly didn't seek ordination 60 years ago so that in 2008 I could become your pastor. When they were fighting for the right to become elders, and then pastors, they were just answering God's call in their lives. Yet, their struggles, their ministries through the channels that were open to them--Women's circles, Sunday School, etc— their compromises, their ordination as elder, their ordination as minister of word and sacrament—all of their work prepared the way for me and the other women now being ordained.

And struggles for inclusion in the church and in society are still taking place today. Gay and lesbian Christians are still having to struggle for inclusion in the church—are their struggles today preparing the way for people still to come?

Preparing the way. We're all called to do it. But not in the easy way. We don't get to set this schedule or coordinate the details for this preparation. This isn't our show to run. We don't know what the outcome will be. And we don't even know who all will walk down the road we are preparing.

We are called to prepare for God. On God's timetable. For God's glory to be revealed.

Open your bibles, if you will, to Isaiah, chapter 40.

From chapters 40 to 55, there is a very different tone than the earlier chapters of Isaiah's writings. This is the book of consolation—where the people are comforted in the midst of their exile and devastation.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid....”

But a part of the consolation is the preparation. In the wilderness, we are told, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. This work we're being called to is so that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and ALL people shall see it TOGETHER.

Isaiah is calling the people to work together for all people. But when the voice says, “cry out!”, the people have no better sense about what they are to do to prepare than we do.

“What shall I cry?”, they ask.

We are told to get up to a high mountain and lift up our voices with strength. This is not something for which we should have fear either.

“HERE IS YOUR GOD!”

That is what we are to point out to people. We are to boldly and with confidence stand on the mountain tops and show people where we have seen God. Isn't that what John the Baptizer does, with that finger pointing to Christ—here is where I see God. Remember when we saw that picture of John with wings and I told you that “angel” and “messenger” come from the same word? The word is “angelos”, *angelos*, Angel. Messenger.

Another word that comes from the same root is euangelion. And it means good message, or more commonly, Good News. The word euangelion comes into English as Evangelism. Evangelism is, literally, the sharing of Good News.

Yesterday was Meet the Neighbors day. I know that many of you were busy with other projects yesterday, but I want to thank those of you who did show up. Bruce Walters, Randy and Cheryl Marshall, Rich and Julie Anderson, Kay Hamilton, Carrie Lillard, and Carolyn Blackhurst. It was fun. We passed out letters in the neighborhood, inviting people to join us. There are copies of the letter in the narthex if you would like to see what it said or if you would like to take a letter to share with a friend.

But what I saw clearly yesterday was that evangelism scares people. I invite you to speak with someone who went door to door yesterday. Some of them were a little hesitant, or perhaps terrified, to knock on a door. Yet they did it. And it was fun. But evangelism didn't just scare the evangelizers. It scared the people who opened the door. People were often very leery as they opened the door. But when they realized that we weren't trying to sell them something and we weren't trying to convert them or judge them, many of them visibly relaxed. Will people show up in worship because of what we did? I don't know. But that wasn't our job. Isaiah says that we're just to get up on the mountain and tell people—"here is your God!". We'll leave what happens next to God. We are just the preparers, after all. But how did sharing the Good News turn into something that scares us?

I'm thankful to hear that voice in Isaiah telling us to lift up our voices without fear. And I hope that as we struggle together to figure out what it means to prepare the way for God, I hope that we'll be able to go about it with more love and less fear. I hope, like Isaiah, we can say to the cities of Judah (and Boise)—"Here is your God!". Because if "evangelism" really means pointing out to people when and where we see the Divine at work in our world—then we do, indeed have Good News to share. Prepare the way!